

HEALTH

I've bitten my nails all my life – so I found out why, and how to stop

Hypnosis offers plenty to chew on to beat my habit, writes **Kasia Delgado**

You won't get a job or a boyfriend with those bitten nails," was one of my mum's attempts to get me to stop gnawing at my fingers when I was 14. It didn't work. Boys were deeply unappealing to me, then, and I knew that when I finally wrote my best-selling novel, the public would be too compelled by my prose to mind about my chewed-up talons.

I don't blame my mum for going down that route, though, because she'd tried everything else. That anti-nail-biting polish that was meant to taste so horrible? I'd simply got used to the taste. Bribery? Didn't work. My little brother starting to imitate me? I felt bad, but I kept going.

She had tried all the tricks, but I'd been doing this since childhood and I couldn't stop. The compulsion was too strong. Later, when I did get a job and a boyfriend, I could see that actually having my fingers in my

mouth was a bad look, unhygienic and also annoying to others, so I picked at them covertly, or in private. There was always a way to get my fix.

Now, at 34, I've never had my nails grow to a length where I could even remotely paint them. They have consistently been bitten down to the quick, and sometimes it's been painful and bloody. Sometimes one or two have grown a little and I've admired them momentarily before tearing them off like I'm Godzilla on speed. I hate how my hands look, I keep them hidden and I envy people's manicures – but none of that can make me resist the urge.

Of course, nail-biting is a common experience. Officially called onychophagia, it tends to begin in childhood, and is what psychologists call a body-focused repetitive behaviour (BFRB). There isn't much data for BFRBs but the data that exist suggests nail-biting occurs in 30 per cent to 60 per cent



Thinking of herself as an ex-nail biter has encouraged growth for Kasia

of children at the age of 10. Some of them will stop; others will carry on into adulthood, and find it a distressing habit.

In one study, up to 24 per cent of university students reported performing some body-focused

repetitive behaviours at least five times a day.

But why do we bite? Clare Mackay, a professor of imaging neuroscience at the University of Oxford, has spent 30 years researching various neurological and psychiatric disorders.

One of her particular interests is nail biting, as well as hair pulling (trichotillomania), because she has suffered with both. "BFRBs are very much overlooked despite being common and causing significant distress," she says.

Mackay says almost everyone engages in some nail biting, skin picking and hair pulling, but that this becomes disordered when it is uncontrollable and causing distress. "One of the major reasons we don't have better data is that these behaviours are often hidden."

She believes that BFRBs are a consequence for most people of emotional or psychological distress – "it doesn't have to be something



obvious" – and that nail biting can be self-soothing.

I did not have a childhood of obvious emotional or psychological distress – quite the opposite – but research has found that people

with BFRBs often struggle to cope with emotions such as anxiety, frustration, sadness and boredom.

This rings true for me, because I was a very worried, highly strung, young person, and have long battled with debilitating perfectionism.

It's good to understand a little more about this compulsion of mine that I have long dreamt of getting rid of. I have set countless resolutions and so many goals, tried so many habit-forming hacks and tricks. None of it's worked.

The only thing left I've not tried is something I've long been sceptical of – hypnosis. I'm not sure about all the swinging pendulum business, and I highly doubt I'm going to be susceptible because I went to

see Derren Brown on stage and I wasn't picked as one of the people to hypnotise. Do I give off a sense of being too cynical?

Hypnosis has – surprisingly to me – a robust scientific framework. Clinical research has shown that it can help relieve pain and anxiety and aid smoking cessation, weight loss, and sleep. Some people can even use "self-hypnosis" to manage stress, cope with life's challenges, and improve their physical and emotional health. It has been used in various forms for centuries, but it wasn't until 1843 that the Scottish surgeon Dr James Braid popularised the term "hypnosis".

In my first of five sessions with Jonathan Garside at the Hypnosis

I am now watching them grow like a primary school kid watching their cress begin to sprout

Clinic in central London, I say out loud for the first time how childlike and ashamed I feel of my nails, and my inability to stop.

He is so kind, and calm because, of course, he's seen it all, and has dealt with plenty of nail biters since he became a clinical hypnotherapist in 1996. Rather than asking me to list the things I hate about nail biting – shame is not a helpful emotion – he asks me to write a wish list of good things I'd experience if I didn't do it.

They include: "I would like to feel more relaxed about showing my hands to people", "I would love getting a manicure", "I'd feel proud if I could resist this compulsion" and "I'd feel more like an adult than a child".

Already I feel lighter, simply for saying it out loud to someone so compassionate. When I get into the (very comfortable) recliner chair for the hypnosis, there are no swinging pendulums, just Jonathan's soothing words, telling me to relax, focus on my breath and listen to the sound of his voice.

I feel my body go heavy as he plays the sounds of birds and the sea, telling me that I am capable of having long, lovely nails, and that in the future I'm going to take care of them, admire them, and enjoy them.

It's all positive, hopeful, vivid stuff but at first I think: Do I really just have to lie here? Won't I get bored? But how will I bite my nails to handle the boredom?

But then, when I think it's been just five minutes, I realise it was actually 35. I haven't been asleep – I heard every word – but I have been in a deep state of relaxation where I feel more receptive to suggestion.

It's not a quick fix, and Jonathan doesn't claim it is. He is clear

that it will take motivation from me to support the hypnosis by remembering our conversations every time I am compelled to bite, by sitting with the discomfort of my hands resting idly in my lap, or finding another way to handle any unexpressed anxiety.

I am also given a tape he records for me, that I listen to before bed, to "top up" the hypnosis.

But by the end of our fourth session, four of my nails have grown proper, white tips, and I have managed for the first time in my life to resist the urge to break them off. I am now watching the others grow, slowly but surely, like a primary school kid watching their cress begin to sprout.

The compulsion hasn't gone away, and sometimes I begin picking at them automatically. But so far I have stopped each time before it goes too far. I notice myself being more mindful. What has also been helpful is Jonathan encouraging me to think of myself as a former nail-biter, and that it is not my fixed identity.

Of course, not everyone can afford hypnosis (an initial 30-minute free consultation, then £250 per session, or a package of four sessions for £225) and there is no one size fits all for any BFRBs.

Mackay says: "There are various therapies, which have various rates of success, but my opinion is that it is possible to manage (not necessarily completely stop) BFRBs. I don't find it helpful to have a goal of completely stopping."

I can now for the first time envisage a future of waving my hands around enthusiastically. I am thinking of asking the manicurist for either the sort of thrillingly red nails that my grandmother believed "only loose women" wore, or some beautiful gold leaf I admired on a friend at a wedding.

Or, perhaps, some festive snowflakes to show that my growing nails are my very own Christmas miracle.

Artist raises funds with 'rubbish' pets

A pet portraitist named Hercule Van Wolfwinkle is celebrating after his "rubbish" pictures of animals raised more than £300,000 for charity.

What started out as a joke during the Covid lockdown has become a serious business for two charities. The inadvertent artist from Worthing, West Sussex, real name Phil Heckels, doodled a picture of his own pet dog and put it on Facebook in jest in 2020. He was inundated with more than 80,000 requests.



DEFENCE MoD payouts for bullying double

The average settlements paid out by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) for bullying, harassment and discrimination claims have doubled since 2019.

Labour called the figures "shocking" and urged ministers to "root out" unacceptable behaviour in the department.

The average settlement made by the MoD for harassment or discrimination claims was £235,564 in 2022-23, compared with £100,527 in 2020-21.

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CRYPTIC CROSSWORD No 4023 BY HOSKINS

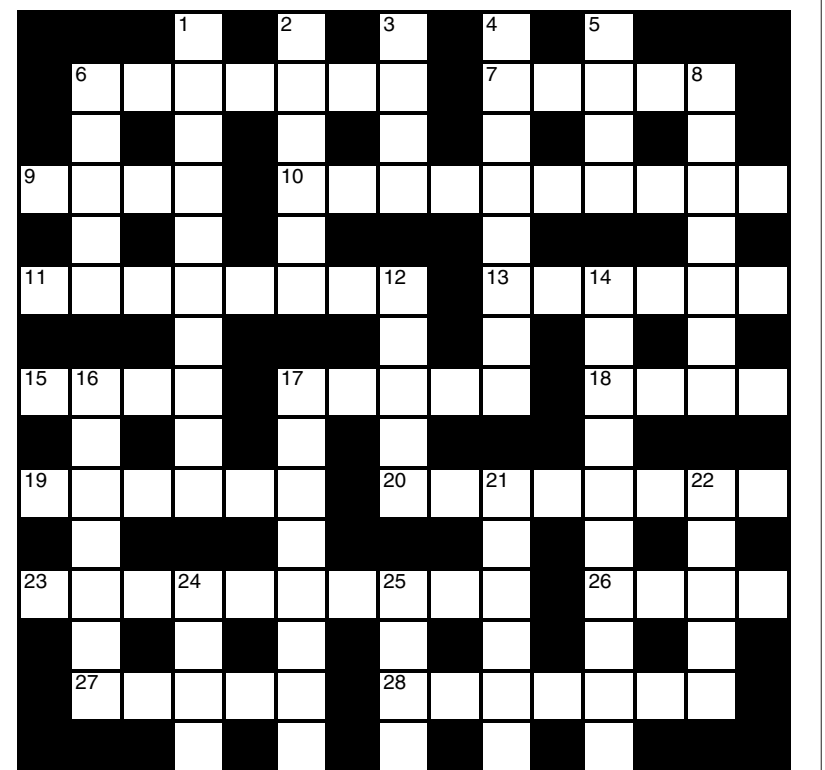
ACROSS

- 6 Salary? Mine must be returned in post! (7)
 - 7 Embarrassed around naked milf (also hot under collar) (5)
 - 9 Large parts I flipping look at lustily (4)
 - 10 German dons drunk brandy with ale mostly (2,3,5)
 - 11 Worker in a chippy, one with a violent past? (8)
 - 13 Pure heroin snorted by actors with MDMA (6)
 - 15 Laugh about queen being an illustrious type (4)
 - 17 A red swelling initially hurts (5)
 - 18 Stop royal ultimately entering Balmoral? (4)
 - 19 Small piece of gum or Sellotape (6)
 - 20 Solo male part rejected by composer (8)
 - 23 This ironic broadcast is overly dramatic (10)
 - 26 Bitter Conservative needs help all around (4)
 - 27 Party led by adulterous leader? For shame! (5)
 - 28 Bit of lolly found in hot cake (7)
- DOWN**
- 1 One involved in distribution of credits on courses (10)
 - 2 Johnson & Johnson? (6)
 - 3 Hoskins would start to examine answer to make clue (4)
 - 4 Goods for those possibly full of gas? (8)
 - 5 Mountainous island fit for climbing (4)
 - 6 In the morning, grunts lifting up letter (5)
 - 8 Unpleasant type poking face using fingers (7)
 - 12 Where the man in pub is turned around? (5)
 - 14 Possible a vile beach needs to be sorted out (10)

- 16 I react excitedly, having screened old smut (7)
- 17 Fine everybody that's conservative (3,5)
- 21 Two firms working to make a case? (6)
- 22 Love and marriage, don't start that as it can make you cry! (5)
- 24 Chat volubly after drop of Tanqueray gin? (4)
- 25 Lad that's served up hot food (4)

Solution to yesterday's Cryptic

W I N E S P E Y
 P O I N T E R G E S T U R E
 U N A E I T G N
 T O K E N D I S H E D O U T
 S Z A T E S O
 C L I P A R T E M B L E M
 H N O S E A B
 I D E A R Y E D O V E
 M E L L Y M I S
 A S L O P E I S O G A M Y
 K I H S O X M
 E U C H A R I S T C L I M B
 U A B G I A C O
 P A T T E R N C A R P O O L
 E T S T N



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